How to Start a Mask Bloc

A collaborative zine by:

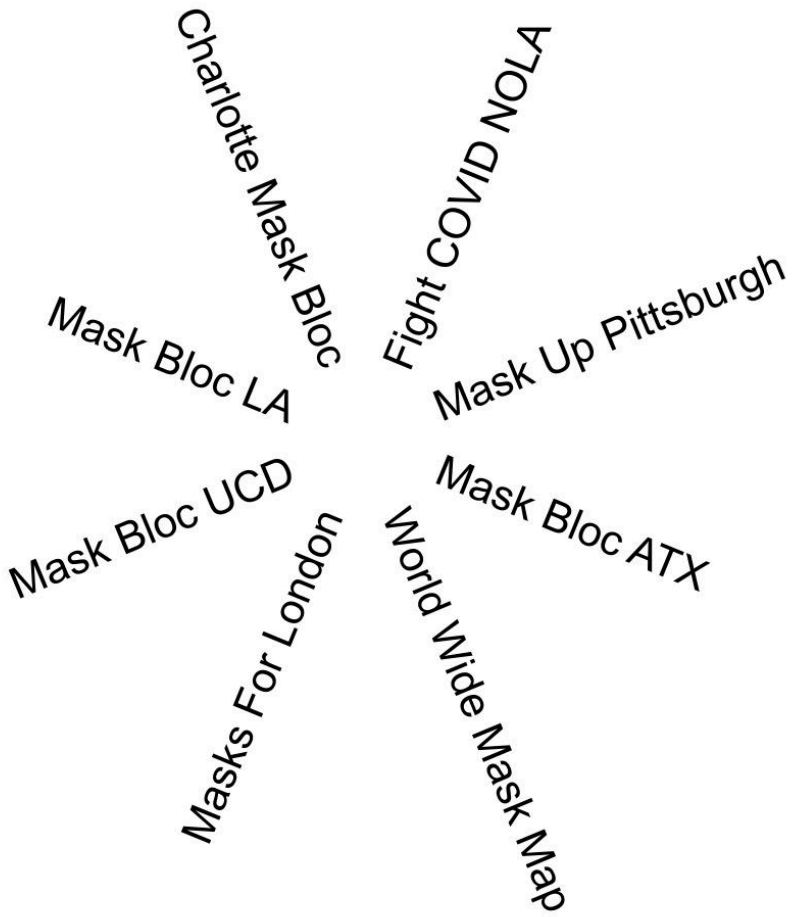

Image Description: The names of the 8 collectives in a starburst pattern. From top right and read in in a circle back to the top, they read: Fight COVID NOLA, Mask Up Pittsburgh, Mask Bloc ATX, World Wide Mask Map, Masks for London, Mask Block UCD, Mask Bloc LA, and Charlotte Mask Bloc.

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Purpose of this Guide

This guide was created to help those who are interested in starting a mask bloc. Creating a mutual aid organization can feel like a daunting task. There's a lot to consider: where to start, how to approach building a bloc in a way that centers the most marginalized, and how to actually help those whom you want to help.

The mask blocs who created this zine tackled all of these questions and came together to pool resources, share knowledge, and work together across experiences, across countries, and across the world. We've included tips that we've gathered along the way from folks doing similar work. Some of us have worked in other mutual aid spaces and taken that knowledge with us.

While this zine was primarily worked on, and written by, mask blocs that exist in the United States, we hope that those elsewhere will find it helpful, too. Where we are able, we have done our best to include information that may be relevant to other countries or noted where something may only apply to the US specifically.

As you'll read, you'll see that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to this work. We all started a little differently, depending on our energy levels, access to information, and funds. Wherever you start, we hope you find joy and solidarity with others in this work. You are welcome to reach out to the blocs around you, including those who worked to create this zine, if you're looking for camaraderie and answers to questions you don't find in this zine.

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What is a Mask Bloc?

Mask blocs provide high-quality, high-filtration (Hi-Fi) masks to their communities for free. They can also be sources of other tools and information about COVID-19, clean air, and accessibility.

For many marginalized communities— including disabled folks, queer folks, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)—mask blocs have become essential to surviving the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic. There are systemic barriers in front of multiply-marginalized folks that affect their access to COVID-19-prevention measures, as well as to organizing networks, experience, and credentials.

Blocs existed prior to mask blocs. Blocs and other mutual aid organizations have a history of responding to wildfires and environmental disasters. These organizations are made up of marginalized people who are impacted by government action—or lack thereof. Masks even have a cross-movement purpose as a surveillance-fighting measure as governments ramp up policing and surveillance.

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What is Mutual Aid?

Mutual aid is an anarchist form of praxis, but anyone can do it. Chances are that if you're considering starting a mutual aid organization, you're already aware of the ways those with power continue to harm us. We want people to witness the power that people have when we band together, especially when institutions (governments, hospital systems, capitalist supply chains, etc.) abandon us.

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How Does Mutual Aid Differ from Charity?

Mutual aid is a large umbrella term to describe a diversity of actions taken by individual people and organizations that seek to help their communities without relying on governments, corporations, or the frequently harmful politics and structural limitations of the nonprofit world, also referred to as the "nonprofit industrial complex."

Mutual aid differs from charity or a nonprofit by:

- Freely giving resources
- Being horizontally or non-hierarchically led
- Blurring the lines between giver and receiver

Unlike a nonprofit or charity, mutual aid groups do not means test or place restrictions on who can benefit from or receive their aid. We do not surveil those who receive aid, nor are there other barriers to "earning it." Anyone who needs aid will receive it, if the mutual aid group is able to help. It is essential for mask blocs to provide masks regardless of who anyone might say "deserves it." When we start making those decisions, we contribute to eugenics.

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How are Mutual Aid Groups Organized?

Most mutual aid groups, including mask blocs, do not subscribe to a hierarchical or "top down" leadership system. Many prefer horizontal structures, consensus-driven decision-making, or non-hierarchical leadership. There is no CEO, no board, and no other benefactors we are beholden to. We answer to those in need.

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Who Can Do Mutual Aid?

Anyone can give and receive mutual aid. There are no credentials required. However, those most affected and marginalized in this era of eugenics are uniquely qualified—and often the most willing—to initiate projects like mask blocs. We hope that this guide will improve **accessibility**, encourage **leadership of the most marginalized**, and bring more of these vital **survival tools** (masks) to communities in need.

Since those who are most marginalized are often the ones to begin these organizations, they are often in need as well. Your organization is not made of “saviors” who come from outside the community, but of those who rely on this community for support, too. Your mutual aid organization can help both you and others. It is not an either/or.

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Mutual Aid is Community Care

Community care challenges concentrations of power by demonstrating that we can care for each other in the face of the state’s lackluster and harmful COVID-19 response. Instead of looking at those in our community as strangers that we view with disdain or ignore entirely—thus contributing to the eugenics that is being enacted upon us—we are connecting with each other. In practicing community care, we become less alienated from each other and become less alienated from ourselves.

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Community Care Saves Lives

Community care is collaborative. It forges bonds of support and interdependence among neighbors, and it can turn strangers into friends or even family. For many, community care is survival. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the types of care people need. While governments lag and ignore the needs of their people, communities have stepped up.

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Community Care Pushes Back Against Harm

Governments maintain their power by promising that they will handle or already are handling the situation. They put out official statements minimizing the state of the pandemic and provide inadequate ways to address it [link]. In 2023, many governments focus only on what to do after being infected, instead of focusing on preventing infections from occurring. Governments, corporate lobbyists, and media also repeat their claims that the pandemic is over and that people do not care about COVID-19. Communities can show the government and other people in power that they’re wrong and that we refuse to allow the infection and destruction of our communities.

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Where to Start

It only takes one person to start a mask bloc. How you begin is up to you.

In general, there are two starting points for most mask blocs:

- **Creating connections** [jump to section]:

  This can include choosing a **name** [jump to section], getting online with **social media** [jump to section] or **email** [jump to section], and connecting in **other ways** [jump to section].

- **Acquiring some masks** [jump to section]:

  This can include familiarizing yourself with **Hi-Fi masks** [jump to section] and the **different kinds** [jump to section] of them, as well as their **designations' meanings** [jump to section].

  This will help you **select** [jump to chapter] the right types of masks to offer your community from among the many **varieties available** [jump to section]. It also helps to be aware of factors that may influence a person's **mask needs and preferences** [jump to section].

There is no wrong place to start! Choose what feels most doable for you!

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Connecting to Your Community

A big part of mask distribution (sometimes called "distro") is outreach. People in your community need to know that your mask bloc exists, how to contact your mask bloc, and be able to make requests easily. Two of the most common ways to go about this happen online: via social media and email.

Naming Your Mask Bloc

When creating a social media page or other presence, the first thing you'll need is a name. Many mask blocs choose to go with simply "Mask Bloc ____" and input their city's name, initials, or area code where the blank is. But it is entirely up to your group how you want to name yourself.

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Connecting Online

Opening Social Media Accounts

Which social media platform(s) you choose to use is also up to you, based on your own comfort and familiarity. You might also focus on whichever platforms are most commonly used by the people you hope to help, since that might be the best way to reach—and thus meet the needs of—your community.

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Opening an Email Account

When making an email, some mask blocs use Proton, while others use Gmail. Some use both, often for different reasons or purposes. Your choice largely depends on how much privacy and security you want for your email. A mask bloc-specific email address also allows you and your other members some distance; it won't all be under one person's name. We will go into more detail online about security elsewhere in this guide [jump to section].

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Other Kinds of Connections

There are many ways to make the existence of your mask bloc known to others, but online is a good place to start. It is familiar and comfortable for many people, as well as often being both efficient and effective. In later sections, we will discuss ways you can make additional connections by doing in-person distribution [jump to section], engaging in outreach to institutions [jump to section], and even recruiting others to your distribution efforts [jump to section].

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Becoming Informed about Masks

A mask bloc's primary purpose is to distribute high-quality, high-filtration masks (also known as Hi-Fi masks). These masks have various designations depending on where you're located in the world.

What Are High-Filtration Masks?

Hi-Fi masks are considered to be those which are rated to filter a very substantial percentage of extremely small airborne particles containing dangerous pollutants, such as smoke, as well as particles containing disease-causing bacteria and viruses, including COVID-19. In many countries, standards are set and regulated agencies certify these masks as meeting the right level of filtration and fit to ensure they will provide the expected high degree of protection to the wearer.

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Examples of High-Filtration Masks:

- KF94
- FFP2
- FFP3
- KN95
- N95
- P100

What Do the Letters and Numbers Signify?

N95s and P100s are also commonly known as respirators, especially in occupational settings. The N and P designations mean they are certified by NIOSH, which sets the workplace safety standards for Hi-Fi masks in the US. FFP2 and FFP3 masks have passed testing roughly equivalent to the N95 and P100, respectively, but based on the European standard.

Unlike the occupational standards, KF94 masks adhere to a Korean standard for respiratory protection and fit which is designed to be accessible to most people for day to day use, and KN95 masks meet a similar Chinese standard.

This is not a complete list, and you can always offer more options (for example, there are also N99 and N100 rated masks), but any of these are a great first step. For ease, in the remainder of this zine, we will refer to all masks that can filter COVID-19 as “Hi-Fi masks” or simply “masks” when speaking in general and specify which types of masks we are referring to by name only where needed.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Cloth and surgical masks **DO NOT** offer substantial protection from COVID-19 or other airborne pathogens.

This is a mask database guide [link] that details the various kinds of masks available. The Masks4All subReddit [link] is also a great resource.

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Selecting Masks

Everyone has different face shapes and sizes, so it helps to have a variety of masks to offer. A mask that fits one person extremely well may not properly seal on another person's face. Having different sizes, styles, and color options can encourage more people to wear them. Children's masks, as well as masks that fit well on the smallest adult faces, are especially difficult to source, so your bloc may consider making these a priority to obtain.

Below is an image that encapsulates some of the ways masks may meet most, but not all, of the criteria for every person. **This is not an objective measure**, but it notes some commonalities of opinion.

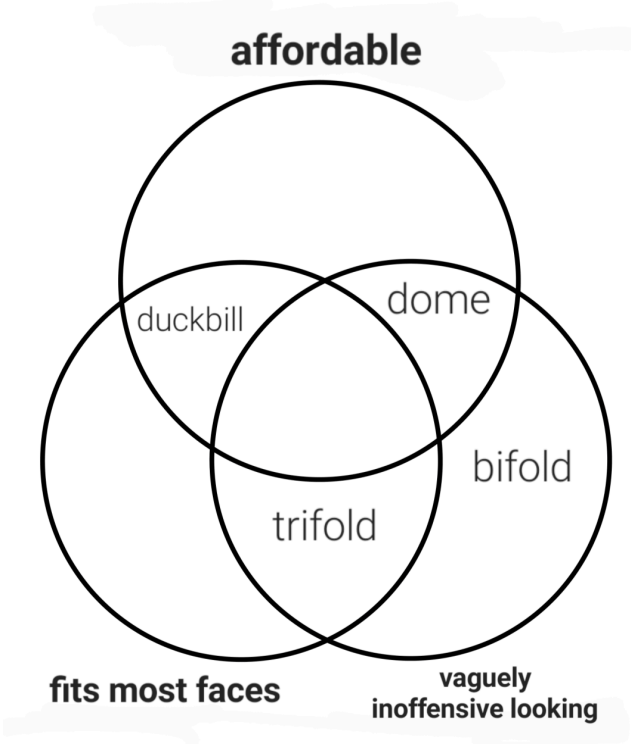

Image Description: A Venn Diagram with no title that is focused on three of the most popular features in several common types of masks. The three circles comprising the diagram are labeled as follows: affordable, fits most faces, and vaguely inoffensive looking. Various portions of the circles and their intersections have the names of the masks that meet those criteria within them. In the intersection of "affordable" and "fits most faces" is "duckbill.". In the intersection of "fits most faces" and "vaguely inoffensive looking" is "trifold." In the part of "vaguely inoffensive looking" that has no intersections is "bifold." In the intersection of "vaguely inoffensive" looking and "affordable" is a "dome." There are no mask types listed under only "affordable" or "fits most faces," nor is there anything listed in the intersection of all three.

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Tips on Mask Variety

Bodies, including faces, and the experiences of having them are diverse! Having a variety of mask styles on hand can help you to accommodate more peoples' needs.

Basic Considerations in Masking

Some factors that need to be considered when selecting a mask include facial features, shapes, and sizes. These can include:

- Face size (this can affect the relative comfort of different mask shapes and dimensions)
- Overall head size (this can influence the comfort of certain kinds of straps)
- Nose bridge height (higher and narrower vs. flatter and broader)
- Face shape (round vs. angular, taller vs. shorter, shape of chin and jawline, etc.)
- Eye placement (close vs. wide set, depth, shape, etc.)

Special Considerations in Masking

Other factors that may need to be considered include:

- Colors [jump to topic]
- Various strap types (including strapless) [[jump to section]
- Metal-free [[jump to section]]
- Latex-free [[jump to section]]
- Certain disabilities [[jump to section]]

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Colors

Color might not sound important at first, but having colors other than white can make masks more approachable and enjoyable for people to wear. They can even lessen the risk of harassment, especially at work.

Black is a popular and nondescript color choice. For US-based blocs, we know that BNX [link] makes black N95s, and WellBefore [link] offers black KN95s with head straps that some independent user testing suggests may fit and filter the air comparably well to many N95s. In the EU, iMask makes both FFP2 [link] and FFP3 [link] masks in black.

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Strap Types and Materials

Some people may require a specific kind of strap in order to wear a mask comfortably—or even at all. Some folks may find head straps painful and prefer earloops; others may find ear loops painful and ask for head straps. It's a good idea to have both kinds on hand, as well as strapless masks—Readimask is common, Alliant Biotech is a cheaper option—for people who find both kinds of strap painful or need them for other reasons. The type of elastic used in the strap may also affect comfort or wearability.

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Ear Loops vs. Head Straps

Strap preference varies from person to person, but there are other aspects in which knowing the difference can be helpful. For instance, to qualify for a NIOSH rating, Hi-Fi masks must have head straps. Therefore, all N95, N99, N100, and P100 masks have head straps, and any mask that has ear loops cannot be an N95. Studies also show that, for most people, head straps will make a more consistently reliable seal against the face.

By contrast to N95 masks, most KN95 and nearly all KF94 masks have ear loops. FFP masks may have either, though you will usually only find ear loops on FFP2 masks, which have a lower protective rating than FFP3. A few manufacturers offer masks made and certified in China to the KN95 standard but which have headstraps as an option. One example is the WellBefore 3D Pro, linked above, which has both a head strap option as well as an ear loop version.

TIP: Due to the NIOSH head strap regulation, spotting a mask labeled “N95” that has ear loops can be one way to quickly identify a low quality counterfeit whose level of protection cannot be trusted.

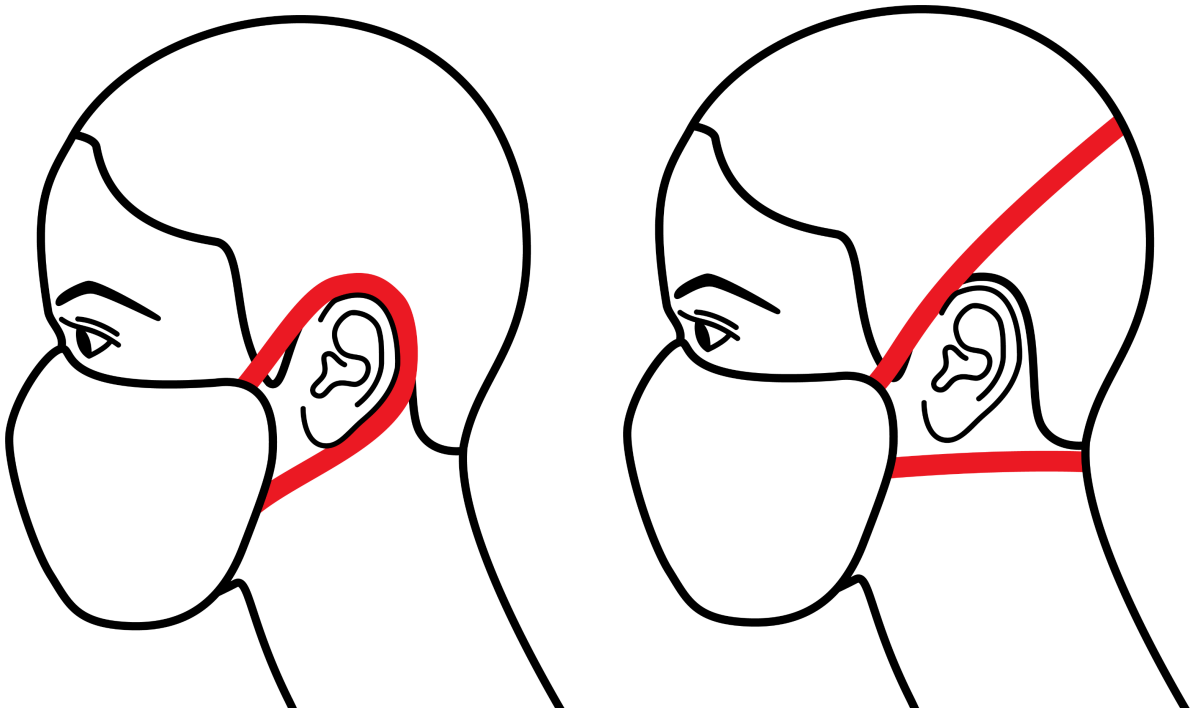

Image Descriptions: Figure 1 (left side): Black and white line drawing of a person with short hair looking page-left. They are wearing a nondescript mask with a thick red band going around the ear (ear loop). Figure 2 (right side): Black and white line drawing of a person with short hair looking page-left. They are wearing a nondescript mask with thick red bands going behind the head (head strap).

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Metals

Some people require metal-free masks to wear during medical tests like MRIs. Others may have allergies to certain metal alloys. Strapless, self-adhesive masks—like the ones from Readimask [link] or Alliant Biotech [link]—are metal-free. Other metal-free mask options exist, too.

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Latex

Latex is a fairly common allergen, and many masks contain latex rubber in their elastics. Not everyone with a latex allergy may know this. That means that a bloc’s responsibilities may include informing people with latex allergies about this risk and being prepared to offer them latex-free mask options. The BYD DE2322 [link] is one example of a latex-free mask, and **all** 3M masks are latex-free [link].

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Disability

In addition to all of the above, certain disabilities may affect the ease and comfort of donning, doffing, or wearing masks. Some examples include certain mobility restrictions, limb or facial differences, and conditions that cause pain around the face or head. Other allergies and sensitivities exist, which may cause reactions to adhesives, odors (also called “off-gassing”), and other features of specific masks. Be prepared to listen and learn, in order to offer care and assistance to people who are struggling to find a suitable mask choice that is accessible to their disabilities and health conditions.

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Getting Masks

Giving out high-quality masks is essential to a mask bloc. Now that you know how to learn to select the masks [jump to section] or variety of masks that best cover the needs of your community, you will need to learn where to acquire high-filtration masks and decide which options best suit your needs.

There are a few ways to get ahold of masks for distribution:

- Purchase yourself [jump to section]
    - Online retailers [jump to section]
    - Manufacturers and distributors [jump to section]
        - List of popular distributors [jump to section]
- Donations [jump to section]
    - From large distributors (retailers, wholesalers, and nonprofits) [jump to section]
    - From local community members [jump to section]
        - In-Kind [jump to section]
        - Funds [jump to section]
- Local surplus from businesses and institutions (workplaces, pharmacies, etc.) [jump to section]
- Online auctions [jump to section]
- Other mask blocs, distros, or COVID-19 advocacy groups [jump to section]

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Purchasing Masks Yourself

When shopping for masks, you can purchase them either as a mask bloc or as an individual.

Online Retail Sites

Popular consumer-oriented e-retailers like Amazon and Walmart are full of untrustworthy third-party sellers—and not all the listings make that obvious. Many of the masks sold on these platforms are fakes that can be difficult to spot at a quick glance, even in person, which is why many people choose to avoid them entirely.

If your bloc decides to do any purchasing from Amazon or similar sites, carefully check each listing to determine if it is both made and sold by a verified manufacturer. Clicking links directly from the brand's website, like BNX or GVS, is often more reliable than searching directly on Amazon. Always inspect the product on arrival to ensure it arrives in the manufacturer's packaging and has the expected markings, such as the expiration date, that the package contains all the usual internal product information paperwork inside the package, and that the masks have the expected construction and markings. (See Additional Resources [jump to page] for links to some information about recognizing NIOSH standards and identifying counterfeit masks.

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Manufacturers and Distributors

Instead of using large e-commerce sites, a lot of people—both regular individuals and also mask blocs—prefer to buy from trusted distributors of reputable mask brands. Most of these are wholesale companies who specialize in providing protective equipment to other businesses and who also sell to individuals via online storefronts.

In addition, major mask manufacturers, such as 3M and Blox, often allow you to purchase either directly from their site or will link you from their site to an authorized distributor, such as Fisher Scientific, Industrial Safety, or Stauffer Safety, where you can make your purchase.

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Popular Manufacturers and Distributors:

- 3M [link]
- Blox [link]
- Bona Fide [link] (bulk discounts)
- Project N95 [link] (sells a variety of brands, all verified)
- Powecom [link]
- WellBefore [link]
- BNX [link]
- Gerson Company [link]
- Moldex [link]
- Fisher Scientific [link] (known for having occasional amazing sales)
- Industrial Safety [link]
- Stauffer Glove & Safety [link]
- Be Healthy USA [link] (frequent sales on bulk KF94s, including kids' sizes)

Note: Due to regulations in California, Fisher Scientific cannot ship to residential addresses in California.

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Getting Donations

Donations from Large Distributors

Some large distributors, such as Blox, Project N95, and Bona Fide, provide masks to mask blocs and other mask distribution groups for free. The quantities can vary, as can the method of acquiring masks (application vs. email).

Bona Fide prefers to work with those with a 501(c)(3) designation; however, in the past, they have provided masks to groups without that designation. It can help to partner with someone or seek fiscal sponsorship from an organization you know with that designation in order to secure a donation. Their page about high volume commercial pricing [link] provides email addresses you can use to reach out to about donations.

Project N95 has a form [link] on its website that groups can fill out to request masks. In this form, you can let them know how you plan to distribute them and what groups you hope to target via distribution. They will then reach out with questions or to schedule delivery. You can request specific types of masks from them, though what you receive will vary depending on what is currently available and the donation size. Their smallest donation begins at 2,400 masks. They've also been known to contribute half pallets and even entire pallets, which hold closer to 20,000+ masks.

Powecom and WellBefore have occasionally offered donations to mask blocs as well. The owner of Blox has occasionally reached out to mask blocs via Twitter to donate N95s, although it seems sporadic.

Another source of large donations may be local medical supply companies and manufacturers. A group in Pittsburgh received 19,000 N95s from a manufacturer looking to reduce supply. It may be worth reaching out to these facilities.

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Donations from Local Community Members

Some mask blocs take donations—both monetary contributions and donations "in-kind" (masks and other items already purchased by others)—from local community members. This is a way that mask blocs can raise funds for masks, bulk up their mask supply, and acquire other necessary supplies.

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Direct Donations of Masks and Other Supplies

Many people go through several mask options before choosing one that works for them. This means quite a few people have unused masks in their homes that they may want to donate so that they can help people. As a mask bloc, you can inspect these and redistribute clean and undamaged masks. For masks that do not come individually sealed, you can repackage them yourself (either individually or in packs) in plastic or paper bags and use these masks for distribution.

You may also find that your community members are able to donate surplus rapid tests, other forms of personal protective equipment (PPE), filters, fans, or tape for DIY air purifiers, or other items that you can redistribute to people in need of them. They may also be able to provide you with additional supplies that can help with your bloc's distribution efforts.

Direct donations of masks and other in-kind contributions can help you avoid having to worry about the accounting and potential tax liability that can come with monetary donations.

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Fundraising with Your Community

Monetary donations from the community can make a big impact on the amount of masks and other supplies you can provide. This webinar [link] is a great resource on money-handling and taxes for mutual aid groups.

There are more people who want to help keep folks safe than you might think. Covid-cautious folks with disposable income may be worth reaching out to. However, many other community members may both want and be able to contribute, too. Small donations can go a long way.

Keep in mind that we are here to help members of our community who need the most help; we are not here to impress wealthy donors.

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Ways to Accept Funds

There are many ways to collect monetary donations, including:

- Venmo [link]
- Cash App [link]
- PayPal [link]
- Ko-Fi [link]
- Patreon [link]

For fundraisers dedicated to specific objectives or shorter term projects, such as to create a stock of DIY air purifiers, some collectives have at times also used platforms such as GoFundMe [link] or GiveButter [link], which have functionalities designed for these sorts of narrower or more tailored goals.

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Deciding How to Accept Funds

First, choose from among your bloc whoever is most comfortable handling the money and keeping track of it. This doesn't have to be a one-person job. Then open a Venmo, Cash App, or PayPal account in the bloc's name, or turn an existing account into one for the bloc. This helps people feel more comfortable donating, since it has the bloc's actual name on the account.

Ko-Fi and Patreon give you the opportunity to share more with those who donate or follow those accounts. They also allow donors to set up recurring donations. Please remember that, with any of these platforms, it is possible that chargebacks may happen.

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Maintaining Financial Accountability

When taking donations, especially monetary donations, it's important to be both accountable and transparent. Set clear financial goals and announce them publicly. For example, if you are hoping to use $200 to buy masks, say so. You can also share updates on how the fundraising is going.

Once you've met your goal, let people know. Include the total amount of donations received and what the money will be used for. You can also publish receipts to prove the money has been spent on what the bloc said they were going to spend it on. Be sure to black out all potentially identifying information to keep everyone safe.

Some blocs close donations as soon as they have raised their target amount. This helps control the flow of donations, ensuring that none get missed if they come in at an unusual time of day or not during a fundraising push at all.

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Using Wishlists

If your bloc needs extra supplies, Amazon wishlists are an easy way to get the additional supplies you need, like plastic bags, dispensers, and such. Many potential donors feel comfortable with Amazon, and it makes it easy for people to donate. Amazon wishlists do require a delivery address. You can select an Amazon locker as a pickup point or choose a local institution, business, or residential address where you can receive deliveries.

Target also has a wishlist function and is a more reliable source for certain popular masks, like the 3M Auras, as they are an authorized reseller for 3M.

SECURITY NOTE: With some prodding, some folks may be able to get the address associated with your wishlist from third-party suppliers. We recommend that, if you know of a friendly business or institution, ask them if they would be comfortable receiving packages that your bloc can pick up after they've arrived. Virtual addresses are another option, but they do require additional funds.

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Surplus from Local Businesses and Institutions

Workplaces

Some workplaces have high-quality masks available that often go unused. You may be able to take these and redistribute some to your community. This will likely require discretion, so be careful.

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Pharmacies

Some pharmacies in the US did not give out the stock of Hi-Fi masks they received when the COVID-19 federal distribution program was active. They may have some to donate if they are trying to make space in the back.

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Institutions

Many institutions like hospital systems, school systems, and long-term care facilities are offloading their stock of PPE since they've abandoned pandemic precautions. Some folks have happened upon unopened palettes of N95s being dropped on the curb, outside dumpsters, or sitting in stock rooms waiting to expire.

If you have connections to institutions that you know once stocked N95s, it might be a good time to see what's happened to them, and if any of them can be taken for free while they're still usable.

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Online Auctions

There are also lots of listings on auction sites with N95s, FFP2s, etc. selling for a fraction of their value. The main catch is that these listings are time-sensitive, the listings may be located in any region covered by the auction site, and most auction sites do not ship. In addition, the quantities are often so large—in some cases many palettes sold as one lot—that it can be a challenge to pick up the items in-person.

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Popular Auction Sites to Check:

- GovDeals (US, Canada) [link]
- Public Surplus (US) [link]
- GC Surplus (Canada) [link]
- BidSpotter (worldwide) [link]

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Other Mask Blocs, Distros, or COVID-19 Advocacy Groups

We all aim to help people avoid getting sick with COVID-19 or other airborne pathogens, germs, and infections. Lots of mask blocs work together to coordinate donations of supplies or work alongside other COVID-19 advocacy spaces in their communities.

If you're running low on masks, reach out to those around you. They may be able to help you until you're able to stabilize the flow of masks again.

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Giving Out Masks

Now that you have some masks, it's time to start giving them out! There are several ways to give people masks, including by **taking and fulfilling direct requests** [jump to section], **in-person distribution** [jump to section], and by empowering people outside your bloc to **serve themselves** [jump to section] and **provide masks to others** [jump to section]. As your distro efforts grow or when community members donate other supplies, you may opt to give out **mask accessories and other pandemic resources** [jump to section]. Sometimes you may need to be **persuasive** [jump to section].

Taking and Fulfilling Direct Requests

Many mask blocs take requests directly from community members in need of masks.

In order to do this safely and effectively, you will need to decide: how to **take requests for masks** [jump to section], how to protect the **privacy and security** [jump to section] of the people requesting masks, including their personal information (names, addresses, etc.), as well as your own, and how to **fulfill requests for masks** [jump to section].

Taking Mask Requests

There are a few common ways to take requests directly from people who need masks. They each have pros and cons. You and the other members of your team should investigate the options carefully and discuss which method (or combination of methods) will work best for you.

Common methods across mask blocs include:

- Social media DMs [jump to topic]
- Phone [jump to topic]
- Email [jump to topic]
- Online forms [jump to topic]

Image Description: Cartoon of a corded, handheld telephone. A text bubble coming out of the receiver reads, "I need masks!" A second bubble coming in from out of frame on the right reads, "We got you!"

Social Media DMs

Using the DMs on your bloc's social accounts can be helpful for those who spend a lot of time on social media; however, they need to be monitored more often. Sometimes, notifications may not appear or requests may end up filtered into the spam or requests folder by mistake.

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Phone

Communication by phone tends to be more accessible to elders. However, sharing personal phone numbers can be a security risk, dedicated lines can cost money, and free services can be less secure.

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Email

A simple email is a good way to reach out for folks who may not have social media accounts or who are less technologically inclined. Elders tend to prefer email to other methods. When checking for emails, it can help to check spam folders, too. If multiple people work out of one email, a color coding or flagging system can help everyone know whether a request is in progress and who is working on it.

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Online Forms

Digital forms are an option that some prefer because they can collect more information at once and control how it's filtered. You can ask requesters to provide an address, how many people in their household need masks, if they prefer a pick-up or delivery option, and many other useful questions.

You may need to follow up on a form request via email if questions are skipped or you need more information. Before releasing a form to the public, it can be helpful to have a few people you trust test it out to make sure that the questions are clear to them, no essential information was missed or allowed to be skipped, and that the answers come through as you want them to.

Google Forms is easy to use and automatically generates a spreadsheet from the replies, but CryptPad is more secure. Other options include Jotform and Airtable.

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Security Concerns with Requests

If you are accepting direct requests for masks, chances are, you're working with information concerning someone's address or phone number. Potentially your own! Make sure you treat that information as sensitive and keep it secure. This is essential to keeping both you and those requesting masks from your mask bloc safe.

Operational and informational security (often referred to as opsec and infosec) may look different for every mask bloc and every interaction. Security choices are made based on technology knowledge, access needs, vulnerability, and comfort levels, among other factors. It's important as a bloc to discuss the advantages and risks when choosing communication methods. These include the differences between various social media sites, SMS (texts) vs. Signal, Gmail vs. Proton Mail, Google Forms vs. CryptPad vs. Jotform, etc.

Note: Our resources guide at the end of the zine has information on Signal and Proton Mail.

Security Needs are Diverse, Personal, and Individualized

It's important to always center the consent and autonomy of those receiving aid. A person's security concerns can become a barrier to access. Removing barriers and maintaining autonomy is a key way that mutual aid differs from charity. As mutual aid organizations, we give help to anyone who asks.

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Fulfilling Requests

Some of the most popular ways mask blocs distribute masks are directly via personal **pickup** [jump to topic] and **delivery** [jump to topic]. Many blocs, especially those who serve a wide area, such as entire states or provinces, or whose coverage area is more rural or less densely populated also send masks directly to people who need them **by mail** [jump to topic] or via other shipping services.

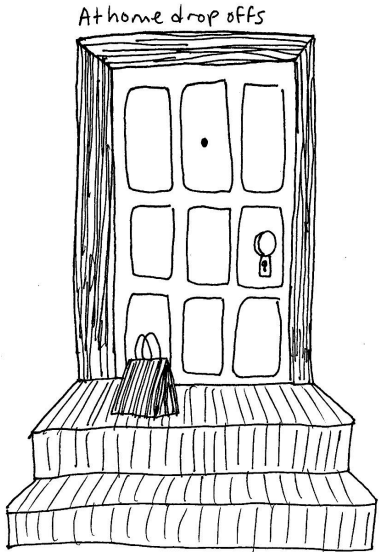

Image Description: Cartoon illustration of a door with a handled bag sat on the stoop in front of it. Above the door, handwritten text reads, "At home drop offs."

Pickup

When arranging a pickup with someone who requested masks, you can either meet them for a handoff somewhere public, such as a park or parking lot, or they can visit your home for pickup, if that's a decision you're comfortable with making.

If there is a local leftist organization, business or other location who is already COVID-safer (or who you can bring around to the importance of covid safety), they may be willing to act as a pick-up location for folks who need masks.

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Delivery

If you deliver masks to someone, you are likely dropping them off at their home or workplace. A contactless drop-off is a popular option, because it allows everyone to keep their distance, acquire masks, and avoid scheduling mishaps.

Common contactless drop-off locations can be:

- On a porch
- By a set of mailboxes in an apartment building
- By their front door

When someone is picking up masks or you are delivering to them, it's important to wear a high-quality mask yourself. We want to keep the people we are providing masks to safe, as well as keep ourselves safe. Wearing a mask also models the behavior and ethic of community care that we are advocating for people to adopt in their own lives.

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Shipping

Mask blocs frequently get requests from outside their immediate area, and there is not always another group close by or anyone else able to offer assistance. In these cases, many blocs at least occasionally ship packets of masks directly to people wherever they are. A few blocs have a standing policy of shipping to any address that requests it from within a given state, province, or other region.

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Deciding How to Ship Masks

There are a variety of ways to ship masks from one place to another, but most mask blocs mail their shipments of mask packets by the regular post. UPS and FedEx can be helpful in specialty circumstances, such as when they require guaranteed overnight mask delivery in an emergency or if they opt to send a parcel internationally. Typically, though, the cost and hassle comparison vs. the postal service tends to favor the postal service, at least in the US.

No matter where you live, you will want to check your local options, current costs (USPS in particular changes these unfortunately often), privacy and security factors, and postal regulations to make sure that you are able to make an informed choice that lines up to your needs and comfort. Much like with handling wishlists [jump to section] and local requests [jump to section], you will want to factor for your privacy and security.

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Using Third-Party Shipment Services

In some cases, you may have the option to use a third-party service to help coordinate shipments and, occasionally, cut costs as compared to paying for postage directly to the carrier. In the US, for instance, many mask blocs use Pirate Ship [link] as an alternative to dealing directly with the USPS for setting up shipments.

Pirate Ship can help you find cheaper, faster, and more convenient options than USPS. The most convenient USPS option, the Priority Mail flat rate boxes, is very easy to use but frequently not the best value. Using Pirate Ship or USPS online can also mean less risk of exposure to COVID-19, due to not having to physically go to the post office. USPS allows you to purchase boxes and shipping labels online. They can be shipped to your house, where you can pack and request no contact pickups of your boxes. Click-N-Ship allows you to print out labels online.

A downside of Pirate Ship is that it requires purchasing more of your shipping supplies up front, whereas USPS will provide you with free supplies. Boxes and large envelopes can either be picked up at a post office or you can have them sent to you by mail, and they will print the shipping labels either at the counter or automatically, via the self-serve kiosk.

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In-Person Distribution Methods

Tabling on Your Own

Tabling at a populated location is another way to pass out masks to the general public. You can advertise in advance for people to pick up masks at your tabling location, try to connect with people out and about, or some combination of both.

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Tabling Safely

When tabling, you want to choose a location with high enough traffic to be seen but low enough that you feel safe. A more populated place may decrease the chances of harassment. Tabling with a partner or group is always safer than tabling alone.

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Making Your Table Appealing

It can help to have some additional items with you to table, such as snacks or water that folks can take with them. Cold drinks when it's hot and hot drinks when it's cold are often appreciated, especially by unhoused community members. Fans can also be helpful in the outdoor heat and mitigate transmission risks if positioned to draw in fresh air from away from crowds.

Informational zines, flyers, and stickers about COVID-19 or other topics of interest that include ways to contact your mask bloc can also be good, as well as information on how to help.

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At Events Hosted by Others

Tabling at or attending existing local events is another way to distribute masks.

Some possible types of events are:

- Protests
- Leftist gatherings
- Any other space that **should** be centering community care

Staying Covid-Safer at Events

While attending these events, keep yourself as safe as possible. Consider bringing a Corsi-Rosenthal (CR) box or portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter to indoor tabling-type events to create a safer space. If people ask about it, talk to them about how clean air can help keep us safer. Masking is one part of a layered protection approach, after all!

If you know an event is happening in your area that isn't requiring or offering masks, consider contacting them about it. They may ask your mask bloc to attend the event or to provide them with masks to help make things safer for everyone.

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Random Handouts

Many people in mask blocs have found some success in keeping masks on their person, or in their cars, to hand out while running errands, taking walks, or going to medical appointments. You may see other people in surgical or cloth masks who don't know that those masks are less effective. Sample packs with a few different kinds can be great for introducing people to the options that are out there.

If you feel comfortable, approach people and offer them an upgraded mask. If you have fun color options, suggest one matching their outfit. It helps to explain what makes high filtration masks the best choice, such as how they offer a better seal and have more protective layers within the mask. Many people also highlight the comfort, since they are less prone to bunching or collapsing inward, toward the mouth, as compared to surgical masks.

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Mask Bags

Some people have created a Hi-Fi mask-shaped bag that they carry masks around in. This bag can tell people around you that you have masks for free, and people may approach you all on their own before you have to approach them.

We've included the specs for a bifold style of DIY mask bag design and some unaffiliated links to purchase pre-made mask-shaped bags below.

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DIY Mask Bag

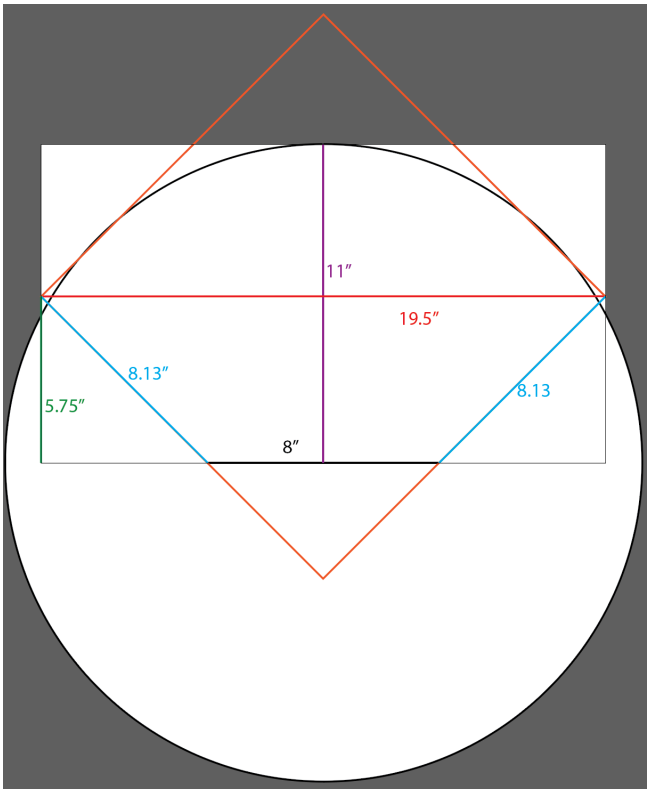

Image Description: A rough sewing pattern showing a circle with an 11 inch radius that has a smaller square overlaid at a 45 degree angle. Where the corners touch the edge of the circle (at about 10 and 2 on a clock face), short lines are drawn straight up and down (marked 5.75"), creating an 19.5 by 11 inch rectangle that touches the circle at the top (12 o'clock) and cuts into it by the same distance. Measurements are marked along the various edges, which have been color coded and labeled to show other dimensions of the pieces.
(Source: Fight COVID NOLA)

Directions:
Using a square of fabric, cut off the corner and intersect it with a circle. The circle should have an 11-inch radius, measuring from the bottom of the bag. This can also be done by converting an already existing tote bag.

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Mask Bags for Purchase (Examples)

- Shopee [link]
- PackXpress [link]
- Veasoon [link]
- Hebbly Shop [link]

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Self-Serve Mask Distribution

Mask Dispensers — Outdoor

Some mask blocs have found success in putting up mask dispensers. Dispensers are typically semi-weatherproof containers that let community members grab masks themselves while they're out and about. Often these dispensers will be secured to fences, bus shelters, sign posts, and other high-traffic areas. Stocking dispensers only with individually-sealed masks prevents them from getting damaged in rain or other weather events.

Outdoor Mask Dispenser (Example)

Image description: Photo of a black bus shelter, taken from the side. It has metal mesh walls, a bench, and a pointed roof. There's a clear acrylic box (mask dispenser) on the wall with masks inside, including visible black KN95s. A sticker on the side of the dispenser reads "we keep us safe" around an image of two hands holding a mask. To the right, N Carrollton Street stretches off into the background with the sun low in the sky above it. To the left, is a red building with a black awning reading "boiled seafood" in white and a light-up sign with the Smoothie King logo.

(Source: Fight COVID NOLA)

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Mask Dispenser Tips

Mask Bloc UCD put together this supply list [link] for getting started with dispensers.

One option to fund these dispensers is to let community members “adopt” them. This can help to distribute labor and transportation when refilling them.

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Mask Dispensers and Displays — Indoor

DIY Mask Display (Example 1)

Image Description: Wide shot showing a display filled with mask packets. It is constructed of short lengths of thin bamboo and yarn. It's hung on a narrow brown wall from a silver-colored heavy duty command strip picture hanger by a loop at the top, and 3 clothespins hang from a length of yarn, each with a sealed packet of 10 black KN95 masks. 3 small handwritten signs in red sharpie are staged around the picture hanger. They read as follows: “Need a mask? Take a pack!,” “100% Free! Yes, really!” surrounded by tiny hand-drawn hearts, and “Happy holidays! We keep us safe!” It is tucked into the nook of a doorway on the side wall. There are 6 tiers of bamboo, so it holds a total of 18 masks at one time. On the door can be seen a hint of a Black Lives Matters poster, and the hallway carpet is a garish pattern that is unfortunately very reminiscent of images of covid virions and their spike proteins.

(Source: @SleepyKnave on Twitter)

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DIY Mask Display (Example 2)

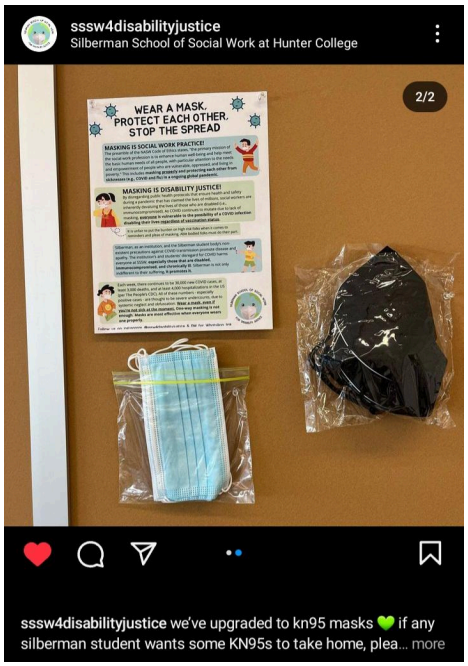
sssw4disabilityjustice
Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College
2/2
WEAR A MASK.
PROTECT EACH OTHER.
STOP THE SPREAD
MASKING IS SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE!
MASKING IS DISABILITY JUSTICE!
sssw4disabilityjustice we've upgraded to kn95 masks 💚 if any silberman student wants some KN95s to take home, plea... more

Image Description: Another example of a distribution set-up on a tan bulletin board, which has been posted to Instagram. There are wrapped packs of black KN95s pinned to the bulletin board by the packaging. There is a small ziploc bag pinned to the board with surgical masks sticking out.

There is also a flyer that reads, "Wear a mask. Protect each other. Stop the Spread. Masking is social work practice! The preamble of the NASW Code of Ethics states, 'the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, living in poverty.' This includes masking properly and protecting each other from sicknesses (e.g., COVID and flu) in an ongoing global pandemic.

"Masking is disability justice! By disregarding public health protocols that ensure health and safety during a pandemic that has claimed the lives of millions, social workers are inherently devaluing the lives of those who are disabled (i.e., immunocompromised). AS COVID continues to mutate due to lack of masking, everyone is vulnerable to the possibility of a COVID infection disabling their lives regardless of vaccination status. It is unfair to put the burden on high risk folks when it comes to reminders and pleas of masking. Able bodied folks must do their part.

"Silberman, as an institution, and the Silberman student body's non- existent precautions against COVID transmission promote disease and apathy. The institution's and students' disregard for COVID harms everyone at SSSW, especially those that are disabled, immunocompromised, and chronically ill. Silberman is not only indifferent to their suffering, it promotes it.

"Each week, there continues to be 30,000 new COVID cases, at least 3,000 deaths, and at least 4,000 hospitalizations in the US (per The People's CDC). All of these numbers - especially positive cases - are thought to be severe undercounts, due to systemic neglect and obfuscation. Wear a mask, even if you're not sick at the moment. One-way masking is not enough. Masks are most effective when everyone wears one properly. Silberman School of Social Work for Disability Justice.

(Source: @SSSW4DisabilityJustice on Instagram)

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DIY Mask Dispenser (Example 3)

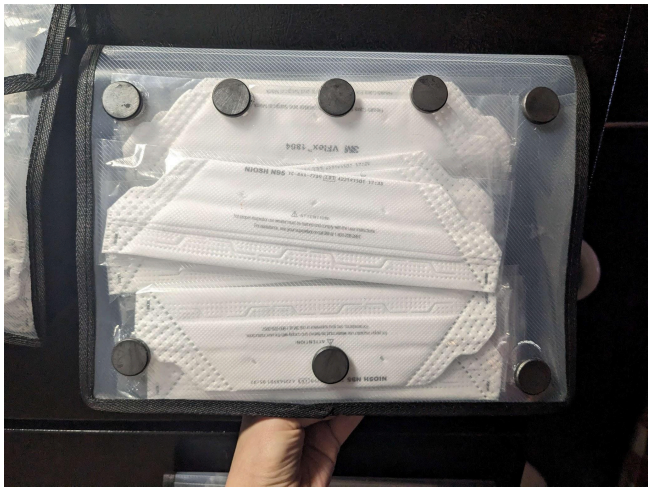

Image Description: Photo 1 (left side): Clear, high-capacity folder with a snap-closure flap, a clear pocket with a blank "notes" card, and black edges, handing on a black fridge with white 3M Vflex masks inside. Photo 2 (right side): The back of a clear, high-capacity folder with black edges, white 3M Vflex masks inside, and 4 black round magnets glued to the corner, plus another 3 along the top edge and an extra single one in the center of the bottom edge. It's being held in one hand in front of a black fridge.

(Source: Mask Bloc ATX)

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Other Organizations and Institutions

Distribution that depends on individuals from your mask bloc and other mutual aid organizations is just one of many ways to get masks to your community. Other organizations and fixed locations such as schools, apartment buildings, shelters, and even stores may be interested in distributing masks.

Community fridges, free pantries, blessing boxes, and resource shelves of all types can also be great spaces to distribute masks. (See photos below for examples.)

Find an employee, teacher, resident, social worker, or similar person who is already working or living in the facility and willing to distribute. You can also hang up flyers advertising the masks and your bloc or even create a mini-mask distro by using any of the self-serve options: boxes or bins, on the outside of a door by taping bags of masks or something that can serve as a dispenser to the door or helping them to make their own DIY display [link].

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More Than Just Masks

Whether fulfilling direct requests in person or by mail, engaging with the public while tabling or by random encounters, or setting up self-serve displays and dispensers, many blocs offer pandemic supplies that support mask use and make it easier or that are equally difficult for many people to access.

If you want to go beyond masks when it comes to COVID-19 prevention, consider the following:

- Rapid tests
- Face shields
- Safety glasses and goggles
- SIP valves [link]
- Hand sanitizer and wipes
- Ear savers, mask tape, and other accessories

Tips about Other Supplies

You may be able to get a hold of free or surplus rapid tests from a local health clinic or health department that is no longer doing distro and does not want them anymore. Some rapid test distributors may offer wholesale deals if you can buy in bulk. It never hurts to reach out to them and ask.

Face shields can help protect further against potential infection as an additional layer. They are **NOT** a substitute for a mask, because they do not filter the air you breathe. Safety goggles and glasses with side shields offer similar additional protection when worn with a mask, specifically around the eye area.

SIP (Sealed Intake Port) valves can be installed in most masks using just regular scissors or, if you prefer, a 9/16” round hole punch [link] and a mallet or hammer. These valves allow the user to drink through a straw while still offering a good seal.

As you get to know your community and your own capacity, you can consider the various options for extra supplies or services you can offer. You can then choose the ones likely to offer the most benefit to the people you are helping and decide whether—and, if so, how—you might be able to fit them into your distribution efforts without overextending yourself or your bloc.

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Discussing Mask Utility and Overcoming Hesitancy

COVID-19 and masking have become difficult topics to raise with some people, who often have fixed opinions or believe themselves to be better informed than may actually be true. In cases like this, mask blocks have found that people are occasionally more receptive to discussions around clean air and airborne disease in general, as compared to focusing on COVID-19 specifically.

There are many diseases that are caused by germs that can be transmitted through the air, just like the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These include a large percentage of common respiratory infections. So this may be

a discussion route to attempt if you sense an individual or institution has hesitation regarding masking and other mitigations to prevent COVID-19.

Masks can also help with:

- Wildfire smoke
- Pollution
- Cigarette smoke
- Asthma
- Seasonal allergies
- Smell sensitivities
- Dust
- Occupational hazards

This is far from a complete list. High filtration masks support a multitude of needs and have effectively done so around the world for many years prior to COVID-19.

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Other Considerations

In order to get off on the right foot with your distribution efforts, it's important to think about what else you might need in order to safely and successfully deliver masks to your community. These often include **additional materials** [jump to section] for packing, protecting, and organizing masks and **additional people** [jump to section] to help share the labor and prevent burnout.

Extra Supplies

Masks are not the only thing you'll need to get started. It can help to have some extra supplies on hand to conduct drop-offs, pick-ups, and tabling.

Packing and Protecting

Plastic or brown paper bags can help with transporting masks to folks. Small plastic bags are helpful for individually packaging masks that may not come individually packaged. These individually packaged masks—safely sealed in plastic to remain sanitary—can then be put in dispensers.

Lunch-sized brown bags are a great option for bundling up five or ten masks into one bag. Label them with the type of mask, mask size, and amount. Then you can grab a bunch as needed for distribution.

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Labeling and Organizing

For labeling, sharpie markers, printable labels, or even having custom stickers made are all good options commonly used by mask blocs to stay organized and communicate with the people receiving their mask packets. Make sure to include a way to contact your bloc on the packet! Providing contact information ensures that the person receiving the masks has no barriers to requesting more and remaining protected.

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Recruiting

While it isn't required to have help—remember, even one just person doing distro can be a mask bloc!—a few extra hands can make a real difference. You may come across like-minded folks who are interested in lending a hand as you distribute.

Mask blocs have found new members in all sorts of places, including:

- Tabling events
- Lex (a queer app modeled after classifieds in newspapers)
- Social media
- COVID-safer Discord groups
- CovidMeetups.com

It can help to talk to potential new folks a bit about why they're interested in joining your mask bloc and the type of work they may be interested in and capable of doing, as well as access needs. Tasks that need coverage might include dropping off masks, managing social media, organizing requests, making flyers, etc. Everyone may end up wearing a few different hats. That's okay! The key is maintaining good communication!

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Some Final Tips and Things to Keep in Mind

We know we've thrown a lot at you. Remember, you don't have to do every one of these things just to get started. Masks save lives. Getting them on faces is the goal.

This work can feel urgent and important. It is. But we also encourage you to take it at your own pace. Working too quickly or on too large of a scale can lead to burnout. A huge percentage of the folks who take on this work—probably yourself included—are multiply-marginalized, and many of us are disabled. Our energy is already divided in many ways just trying to survive.

White supremacist capitalism idealizes a constant state of burnout, measuring "productivity" within a framework designed to exhaust us and make organizing difficult. We urge you to resist this type of thinking.

Distributing masks is a part of a larger goal of creating radical accessibility. In reaching for that goal, the work of distribution should be radically accessible, too.

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Embracing Rest and Crip Time

Many of us have found embracing "Crip Time" to be a helpful framework. This allows us to balance our own needs and survival with the needs of others. Your needs may include rest, taking it slow, and taking breaks. That's all okay! Whatever speed allows you to function at your best is okay.

This works hand-in-hand with the concept of "pacing": a concept and protocol developed by/for people with ME/CFS (myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome). ME/CFS is a post-viral illness that often overlaps with Long COVID, except it has been around much longer and can be caused by many different viral infections. Pacing includes rest and taking breaks as you perform tasks—crucially, *before* you fully run out of steam—so that you can conserve energy, assess your energy levels as you work, and prevent crashes and burnout.

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Additional Resources and Reading Recommendations

Below are some reading recommendations, resources, and other links to more information on some of the topics we've touched on throughout this zine.

- 10 Principles of Disability Justice by Sins Invalid [link]
- Mutual Aid by Dean Spade [link]
- How Disabled Mutual Aid is Different from Abled Mutual Aid [link]
- Webinar on Money-Handling For Mutual Aid Groups [link]
- ME/CFS Resources:
    - Pacing [link]
    - More on pacing [link]
    - Diagnostic information [link]
- What is Proton Mail? [link]
- Proton Mail vs. Gmail [link]
- What is Signal? [link]
- Video on Why and How N95s Work: "The Astounding Physics of N95 Masks" [link]
- How to Tell If an N95 is NIOSH Approved [link]
- How to Tell If an N95 or KN95 is Real or Fake [link]
- A Collection of Mask Testing Data and Other COVID-19 Resources [link]
- N95 vs. FFP2 vs. KF94 vs. KN95 [link]

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